

# What Do We Mean By “Civic Engagement”?

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*Civic engagement refers to the ways in which citizens participate in the life of a community in order to improve conditions for others or to help shape the community's future. This term has been used to date primarily in the context of younger people. But in the past few years, a new movement has emerged to promote greater civic engagement by older adults. This article begins by reviewing existing definitions of civic engagement and concludes that there is no single, widely agreed-upon meaning for the term. The second part of the article looks at attempts to measure how civic engagement is being practiced by Americans of different ages and finds that patterns of civic engagement differ dramatically between younger and older generations. The final part of the article describes some recent initiatives aimed at expanding the civic engagement of older adults.*

**Keywords:** *civic engagement; volunteering; community service; older adults; Next Chapter*

America needs more than taxpayers, spectators, and occasional voters.  
America needs full-time citizens.

—President George W. Bush  
Commencement address at Ohio State University, June 2002

## Introduction

Finding the right language to describe social change is critical. In some cases, new language is needed. In other cases, existing terminology needs to be adapted to encompass new realities and new opportunities.

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An example of this is the concept of *civic engagement*, which has been used to date primarily in the context of younger people. The expectation that young people will participate in volunteering or community service as part of their growing up is now widespread. In fact, a young person's record of volunteering is now routinely examined, along with grades and test scores, by colleges and universities in evaluating applicants for admission.

In the past few years, a new movement has begun to emerge whose goal is to expand civic engagement by older adults. This movement was largely sparked by publication of the book *Prime Time*, by Marc Freedman (1999). The movement has continued to evolve and grow since then and has attracted an increasing number of supporters. As the movement gathers momentum, this seems to be a good time to consider the meaning of the concept of civic engagement and how it applies to this particular population.

The first part of this article reviews existing definition(s) of *civic engagement* and concludes that there is currently no single, widely agreed-upon meaning for the term. How the term is defined depends to a large degree on the perspective and interests of the definer. The second part of the article approaches this topic by looking at attempts to measure how civic engagement is being practiced by Americans of different ages. What we discover is that the actual patterns of civic engagement differ dramatically between younger and older generations, that they are almost mirror images of each other. The final part of the article reviews some of the national and local efforts now underway that are aimed at expanding the civic engagement of older adults

## Defining Civic Engagement

A Google search on *civic engagement* finds some 383,000 citations for the term.<sup>1</sup> Although this suggests that the term is in fairly wide use, a review of some of the key literature on the topic shows that there is a considerable range of definitions of the term.

A report prepared for the Carnegie Corporation confirms that there is a "lack of consensus on what constitutes civic engagement" (Gibson, 2000, p. 17). And a discussion on the Web site of Campus Compact, an organization that promotes greater civic engagement within higher education, offers a scientific metaphor to argue that a lack of consensus about the meaning of the term at this time is natural and even appropriate in light of the relative immaturity of the field:

Judith Ramaley, the [former] president of the University of Vermont and a biologist by training, has pointed out that when a new organism or biological process is just being discovered, scientists often struggle for awhile, as they try to define together exactly what they have before them. Similarly, the term civic engagement is a term being used to describe many different philosophies of citizenship and many different kinds of activities. (*Civic Engagement: Terminology*, n.d.)

### SPECIFIC DEFINITIONS

As Ramaley notes, how civic engagement is defined depends on the perspective and interests of the definer. What is striking is how wide the range of definitions for the term is. When looked at together, these definitions help suggest the extent and variety of activities that the term encompasses and help to illuminate the various points of view about the concept.

The following are just a few examples of how the term has been defined. In this section we consider definitions that limit the term to a specific realm or type of activity. In the next section, we look at definitions that are much broader and inclusive.

*Civic engagement as community service.* Some definitions of civic engagement emphasize participation in voluntary service to one's local community, either by an individual acting independently or as a participant in a group. For example, "Civic engagement [is] an individual's duty to embrace the responsibilities of citizenship with the obligation to actively participate, alone or in concert with others, in volunteer service activities that strengthen the local community" (Diller, 2001, p. 21).<sup>2</sup>

*Civic engagement as collective action.* Other definitions restrict the term to apply just to action taken collectively to improve society. For example, "Civic engagement is any activity where people come together in their role as citizens" (Diller, 2001, p. 22) and "Civic engagement may be defined as the means by which an individual, through collective action, influences the larger civil society" (Van Benshoten, 2001).

Dean Robert Hollister (2002) of Tufts University prefers the term *active citizenship* to *civic engagement*, but his definition also emphasizes the importance of collaboration with others in a variety of venues: "Active citizenship is about collective action more than the behavior of individuals. It is about collaboration, about intense joint activity...pursuing community issues through work in all sectors, not just government."

*Civic engagement as political involvement.* Yet other definitions limit the meaning of the term to activities that are not only collective but that are specifically political (i.e., that involve government action): "Civic engagement differs from an individual ethic of service in that it directs individual efforts toward collective action in solving problems through our political process" (Diller, 2001, p. 7).

Bernie Ronan (2004), of the Center for Civic Participation, also focuses on the political and the collective dimensions of the term by referring to the historical roots of the words:

The Latin word *civis* has found its way into two words in our language, city and citizen. Civic engagement is about rediscovering politics, the life of the polis, the city where men and women speak and act together, as citizens. The word *civic*, when connected to engagement, implies work, work that is done publicly and benefits the public, and is done in concert with others.

A definition from the Minnesota Vital Aging Network also makes an explicit distinction between *service* activities and *civic* activities and asserts that civic engagement must include a public leadership component:

Civic engagement describes citizen participation in civic affairs....Civic mission is not the same thing as service mission. Service implies doing for and civic implies doing with. Service is about meeting people's needs. Civic is about deliberations and public work aimed at some public issue or challenge. Civic engagement involves active participation and leadership in public life. (*Civic Engagement*, n.d.)

*Civic engagement as social change.* In his definition of the term, David Crowley (n.d.), founder of Social Capital, Inc., focuses on the element of social change inherent in civic engagement: "Civic engagement describes how an active citizen participates in the life of the community in order to help shape its future. Ultimately, civic engagement has to include the dimensions of social change."

### BROAD DEFINITIONS

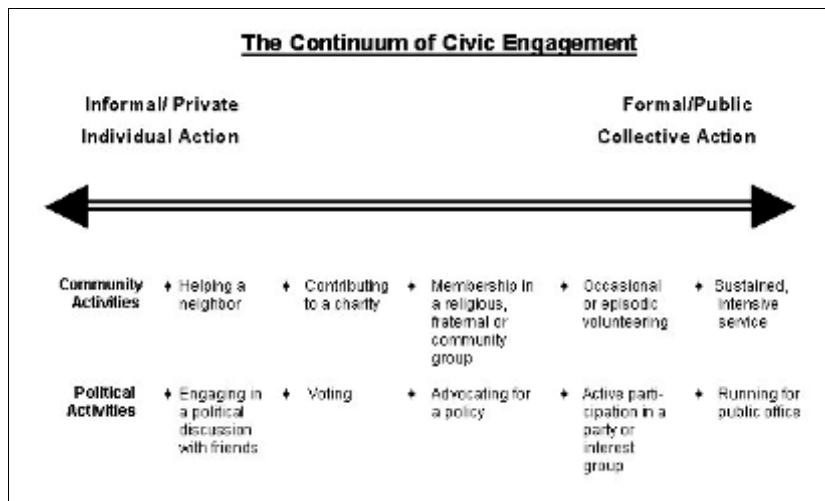
Although the aforementioned definitions limit *civic engagement* in some way, other definitions encompass a wide range of activities. For example, Robert Putnam (2000) used the term *civic engagement* quite broadly. Interestingly, nowhere in his landmark book, *Bowling Alone*, does he provide an explicit definition of the term. The most detailed description of the term is actually part of a discussion of "civic disengagement:"

Civic disengagement appears to be an equal opportunity affliction. The sharp, steady declines in club meetings, visits with friends, committee service, church attendance, philanthropic generosity, card games, and electoral turnout have hit virtually all sectors of American society over the last several decades and in roughly equal measure. (p. 185)

Putnam's definition includes informal social activities (visits with friends, card games) as well as formal activities (committee service), community and political participation. Putnam's primary interest is in "social capital," and he generally uses *civic engagement* to refer to the entire gamut of activities that build social capital.

Other experts also define the term in a broad way. For example, Michael Della Carpini (n.d.), who has written extensively on the topic, makes a point of asserting that the term encompasses a wide range of activities of different types:

Civic engagement is individual and collective actions designed to identify and address issues of public concern. Civic engagement can take many forms, from individual voluntarism to organizational involvement to electoral participation. It can include efforts to directly address an issue, work with others in a community to solve a problem, or interact with the institutions of representative democracy. Civic engagement encompasses a range of specific activities such as



**FIGURE 1:** The Continuum of Civic Engagement

Source: Adapted from Crowley (n.d.).

working in a soup kitchen, serving on a neighborhood association, writing a letter to an elected official or voting.

Yet others deliberately define the term in a very expansive way. For example, “We define civic engagement [as] all activity related to personal and societal enhancement which results in improved human connection and human condition” (Diller, 2001, p. 22) and perhaps the most expansive (and subjective) definition of all, “[Civic engagement is] experiencing a sense of connection, interrelatedness, and, naturally, commitment towards the greater community (all life forms)” (Diller, 2001, p. 22).

#### CHARTING THE DIMENSIONS OF CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

As these varied definitions demonstrate, *civic engagement* includes a number of different dimensions and aspects, with different individuals and groups emphasizing different aspects of the term. Figure 1 is an attempt to show graphically two different dimensions of the term: One (shown on the horizontal axis) is the span between individual or informal activities and more formal, collective actions that involve participation in organizations; the other (on the vertical axis) is the distinction between involvement in community activities (e.g., donating blood or serving as a tutor or mentor for a young person) and involvement in political activities (e.g., voting, supporting a political party, advocating for a particular public policy).

This broad spectrum of activities can include both paid as well as unpaid volunteer roles. Individuals involved in intensive service (e.g., AmeriCorps) typically receive a stipend for their involvement. And, particularly for older adults, civic

engagement can take the form of paid work in areas of high social need, such as education or health care.

The RespectAbility project of the National Council on the Aging has developed a useful scheme to categorize the intensity of volunteering (i.e., the two categories on the right hand side of the “community activities” continuum in Figure 2). They segment volunteering into the following four levels based on time and duration of involvement:

- episodic (e.g., special day and/or one-time projects)
- steady (e.g., regularly scheduled weekly activities with 2 to 5 hours of commitment)
- intensive (e.g., 9 to 12 months of regularly scheduled weekly activities)
- “incentive-ized” (e.g., volunteer stipends, compensation for meals and transportation).

As we see in the next section, the ways in which older adults are civically engaged (in terms of these dimensions) differ in some fairly significant ways from the civic engagement of younger people.

#### A PROPOSED DEFINITION FOR CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

So how should civic engagement be defined, particularly in relation to interest in expanding civic engagement among older adults?

Perhaps the simplest definition of civic engagement is “the interactions of citizens with their society and their government” (*Civic Engagement*, n.d.).<sup>3</sup> Drawing on some of the definitions cited earlier, and particularly on that from David Crowley (n.d.), a useful definition would be the following: Civic engagement describes how an active citizen participates in the life of a community in order to improve conditions for others or to help shape the community’s future.

### Measuring Civic Engagement in Practice

Up to now, we have focused on how the term *civic engagement* has been defined in the abstract. But to get a fuller understanding of the term, it is useful to look at some attempts to define the term operationally, in terms of how civic engagement is actually being practiced in the world. In this section, we consider some recent empirical findings about the extent of civic engagement by Americans and how patterns of engagement vary between generations.

#### INDICATORS OF CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

A 2001 report on *The Civic and Political Health of the Nation* sponsored by the Pew Charitable Trusts (Keeter, Zukin, Andolina, & Jenkins, 2002) presents the results of a national telephone survey of 3,246 Americans aged 15 to 55+ that was designed to find out “what citizens are doing and how often they are doing it.”

**Table 1: The 19 Core Indicators of Engagement**


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Civic indicators
Community problem solving
Regular volunteering for a nonelectoral organization
Active membership in a group or association
Participation in fund-raising run/walk/ride
Other fund-raising for charity
Electoral indicators
Regular voting
Persuading others
Displaying buttons, signs, stickers
Campaign contributions
Volunteering for candidate or political organizations
Indicators of political voice
Contacting officials
Contacting the print media
Contacting the broadcast media
Protesting
E-mail petitions
Written petitions
Boycotting
Buycotting
Canvassing

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SOURCE: Keeter, Zukin, Andolina, and Jenkins (2002).

The researchers who conducted the survey created a list of 19 “core activities” that they considered to be components of civic engagement (see Table 1). These activities are divided into three main categories: indicators of community-focused activities (“civic indicators”), including volunteering and raising funds for charitable causes; indicators of participation in the electoral process, including voting and working for a candidate or a political party; and indicators of political activity, including actively supporting or opposing particular issues or policies. In the report, the researchers focus on the first two forms of engagement: civic and electoral. Although these indicators are by no means inclusive of all of the forms of civic engagement, they are useful in helping to understand similarities and differences between different generations in their patterns of engagement.

The survey found that approximately “half of all Americans can be characterized as engaged” in one way or another (see Figure 2). However, there was considerable variation in how they focused their activities. One fifth of the respondents “specialize in the electoral realm,” whereas “another 16 percent confine their

		Political Activities	
		0 or 1	2 or more
Civic Activities	0 or 1	48% “Disengaged”	20% “Electoral Specialist”
	2 or more	16% “Civic Specialist”	16% “Dual Activist”

**Figure 2:** Four Types of Engagement

Table 2: Patterns of Civic Engagement by Age (in Percentages)

	DotNet (15 to 25)	GenX (26 to 37)	Boomer (38 to 55)	Mature (55+)	Total
Disengaged	56.8	53.0	42.1	43.3	47.6
Electoral specialist	15.1	13.2	19.3	31.3	20.1
Civic specialist	17.0	20.5	18.7	9.1	16.4
Dual activist	11.1	13.3	19.9	16.3	15.9

SOURCE: S. Keeter (personal communication, March 2003).

efforts to the civic [i.e., community] realm.” Another group of respondents (16% of the total) were “active in both the civic and electoral arenas” (Keeter et al., 2002).

#### GENERATIONAL DIFFERENCES IN CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

In their study, Keeter et al. (2002) compared the levels of civic engagement of four generations of Americans ranging from the “DotNets,” who are aged 15 to 25, to the “Matures,” who are older than age 55. They found that the patterns of engagement vary considerably among the different generations (see Table 2).

The good news here is that older adults are on the whole more engaged than the average for all Americans. More than 50% of the 55+ population are engaged in some form (Keeter et al., 2002). Members of the boomer generation (age 38 to 55) are only slightly more engaged, whereas the two younger generations are more disengaged overall than average.

But there are also distinctive differences in the patterns of engagement among the four cohorts. Older Americans have the highest level of involvement in “electoral” (i.e., political) activities of any age group: More than twice as many matures are “electoral specialists” (that is, they are involved in two or more different electoral activities) than those younger than the age of 38 and are 40% higher in electoral participation than boomers.

By contrast, older Americans have the lowest level of engagement in civic (i.e., community) activities of any age group, with less than half the percentage of

**Table 3: Voting Patterns by Age**

	18 to 24	25 to 44	45 to 64	65+
Percentage who...				
Are registered	43	63	73	78
Voted in 2002 election	19	38	56	63

SOURCE: Day and Holder (2004).

“civic specialists” than either the GenXers or the boomers, and are just slightly more than half that of the youngest cohort, the DotNets (Keeter et al., 2002).

Now let’s look more closely at the data on how older adults are actually engaged.

*Voting.* It is well known that older Americans are active participants in traditional electoral processes. Although participation in elections is low and declining among young people, voting remains high among older adults (see Table 3). In fact, seniors’ participation in voting has increased over the past two decades at the same time it was falling for young people: Voter turnout among those 65+ grew from 63.5% in 1972 to 67% in 1996, whereas voting among younger adults has declined steadily since 1972 (Levine & Lopez, 2002). Americans older than age 65 now vote at approximately 3 times the rate of those younger than age 29.

The contrast in attitudes toward voting by the different generations was summed up by a comment made by an anonymous participant in a seminar on civic engagement: “The older generation views voting as a sacrament, but to young people, it’s tangential” (Gibson, 2000, p. 5).

*Organizational membership.* It is at the other end of the civic engagement spectrum—participation in community organizations and volunteer activities—where the status of older adults’ involvement is less clear-cut. For example, seniors present a mixed picture in terms of their participation in community-based organizations, which is one commonly used measure of civic engagement. Membership in churches and other religious organizations increases with age and is highest for those older than age 70. The same is true for veterans groups and fraternal organizations. Participation in neighborhood groups, social service groups, and groups related to health is higher among adults aged 50 to 69 than other age groups. Involvement in public interest groups and other types of civic and community groups appears to be highest among those younger than the age of 49 and declines among older adults (see Table 4).

*Community service.* Many older Americans participate in community service. According to a survey conducted for Independent Sector (*America’s Senior Volunteers*, 2000), nearly half of all those older than 55 say they volunteer. But the

Table 4: Types of Organizations and Membership by Age

Type of Organization	Percentage Answering Yes			
	Age of Respondent			
	18 to 30	31 to 49	50 to 69	70+
Religious	47.9	61.0	68.8	<b>74.3</b>
Veterans groups	2.6	5.4	10.4	<b>15.8</b>
Fraternal groups	6.0	7.8	12.4	<b>20.3</b>
Health	17.6	14.4	<b>18.2</b>	10.5
Environmental	14.1	14.4	9.9	12.1
Other public interest	9.4	9.9	7.4	6.5
Ethnic/cultural	6.6	5.4	5.4	1.4
Neighborhood groups	6.8	21.1	<b>22.2</b>	15.5
Social service	8.1	8.5	<b>8.9</b>	5.5
Civic/community	5.3	5.7	5.4	3.8

NOTE: Groups in which older members predominate shown in bold.

SOURCE: Guterbock and Fries (1997, p. 5).

portion of seniors who volunteer is lower than that of younger people: Although more than 50% of all high school students say they are involved in volunteering, only 47.5% of those older than 55 say they volunteer. Among those aged 65 to 74, 46.6% volunteer, whereas just 43% of those 75 and older do so. (In general, studies show that volunteering peaks in middle age—35 to 54—and is lower among both younger and older persons.) The same survey also found that the average amount of time that older Americans spent in volunteer activities declined from 4.4 hours per week in 1995 to 2.3 hours a week in 1998.

*Promoting civic engagement: Youth initiatives.* One possible reason that the civic involvement of younger people is as high as it is today is that a considerable amount of effort has been invested in recent years in creating mechanisms and incentives to encourage and support this kind of engagement among youth. For example, one likely explanation for the fact that fully 80% of college-bound high school students now participate in some form of volunteer activity (*Youth Engagement*, 2002) is the fact that many colleges—and particularly the most elite institutions—now take community service activities into account, along with grades and SAT scores, in the admission process. A variety of organizations have also been established to promote greater civic engagement among young people. Nonprofit groups such as What Kids Can Do, YouthNOISE, and Purple Sun that focus on youth have emerged. Since 2000, the Coalition of Community Foundations for Youth has been working to increase the support for youth civic engagement by community foundations around the country.

The concept of service learning also has provided a powerful mechanism for expanding youth engagement. The concept integrates community service with school curriculum and gives students the opportunity to get academic credit for participating in volunteer activities. Service learning requires students not only to engage in service but also to reflect on their service and what they have learned from it.

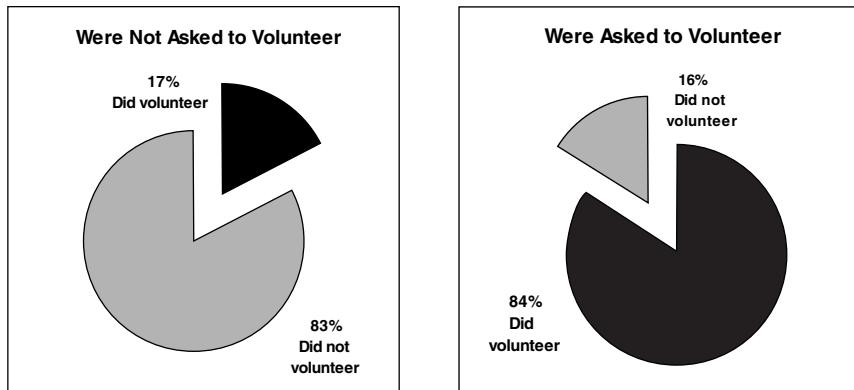
The concept has achieved a remarkably high level of acceptance within the country's schools. But the growth of service learning came about as a result of a sustained effort over a period of more than three decades to establish support mechanisms and secure funding from foundations and government sources. A 2002 report from the National Commission on Service-Learning summarizes some of the key developments that led to widespread acceptance of the concept:

The expansion of service-learning began in earnest [in the 1970s] when individuals in schools and youth development agencies began to find one another and share their experiences....In the late 1980s, national meetings were convened that brought people together across the country, and practitioners began to plan ways to develop and expand their work. By the early 1990s federal legislation had begun to provide support to local initiatives. Campus Compact spread service-learning through hundred of campuses...and in 2001, the National Service-Learning Partnership was established with 1,000 members...to expand and strengthen service-learning in American primary and secondary schools. (Fiske, 2002, p. 18)

As a result of all of this activity, the number of high schools offering formal service learning increased dramatically. Whereas 27% of high schools were involved with community service and just 9% offered service learning programs in 1984, by 1999, 83% were involved with community service and 46% offered service learning (Skinner & Chapman, 1999). By the 2000-2001 school year, more than 13 million public school students were involved in service and service learning projects (Fiske, 2002).

Campus Compact, which was founded in 1985 by the presidents of Brown, Stanford, and Georgetown Universities to promote civic engagement among institutions of higher learning, now includes more than 900 public and private 2- and 4-year colleges and universities across the country. According to a 2003 survey by Campus Compact, more than one third (36%) of all students at member institutions—or approximately 1.8 million students—participated in some form of service activities, and member campuses offered an average of 37 service learning courses (*2003 Service Statistics*, 2003).

Although young people have become actively involved in community service, their participation in the electoral process, as noted earlier, continues to decline and remains a source of worry for those concerned about the future of our democracy. Despite the efforts of groups such as the Youth Vote Coalition and Rock the Vote to encourage greater electoral participation by young people, more remains to be done to reverse this downward trend.



**Figure 3:** The Impact of Being Asked to Volunteer (Adults Age 55+)

Source: *America's Senior Volunteers* (2000, p. 5)

### Expanding Civic Engagement Among Older Adults

Although the graying of America is dramatically altering the country's social landscape, we have yet to develop the range of institutions and mechanisms that are required to support greater civic engagement by older adults. However, there is a growing recognition of the importance of civic engagement—both for society and for older adults themselves. And a number of projects and initiatives whose goal is to encourage greater engagement among this population are now underway.

*Making the “ask.”* One simple and potentially powerful step to increasing the contributions of older adults is to ask them to get involved (Figure 3). A survey by Independent Sector found that

Seniors were approximately five times more likely to volunteer if they were asked. Even people 75 years and older volunteered at a high rate when asked. Approximately 81 percent of seniors over 75 volunteer when asked, compared to only 25 percent when they were not asked. (*America's Senior Volunteers*, 2000, p. 5)

According to Independent Sector (*America's Senior Volunteers*, 2000), about half of all adults age 21 through age 64 are asked to volunteer each year. However, less than one third of those age 65 and older said that they had been asked to volunteer in the past year. African American and Hispanic seniors were less likely to be asked to volunteer than White seniors (although they did volunteer at the same rate as others when asked).

Interestingly, compared to adults of all ages, those older than the age of 55 are less likely to volunteer if not asked (17% of older adults vs. 29% of all adults volunteer even if not asked) and are more likely to volunteer if they are asked (84%

of seniors who are asked volunteer vs. just 71% of all adults) (*America's Senior Volunteers*, 2000).

These data suggest that participation in community service among older adults could be increased substantially if more of them were asked to serve. Whereas this is true for Americans of all ages, it is particularly true of older Americans.

It may also be the case that the kinds of assignments that organizations have to offer may not be well matched with the interests and abilities of potential older volunteers (see e.g., Tanz & Spencer, 2000). A number of observers have pointed out that "old models" of service are not likely to be very appealing to the baby boomers who will be the next generation of retirees and that these programs need to change their messages, if not their structure, if they want to remain relevant and vital. It has been suggested that boomers are likely to be more demanding of assignments that make good use of their skills and that provide opportunities to make real, meaningful contributions. And, organizations may need to provide greater flexibility in assignments to appeal to the diversity of interests and needs of boomers (Lindblom, 2001).

*Community service programs.* Several national programs have been created to involve older adults in community service, but they remain limited in scale. Two federal service programs for older adults under the Corporation for National and Community Service's Senior Corps—Foster Grandparents and Senior Companions—each year involve a total of just 43,000 participants who spend 20 hours a week in service activities in return for a modest stipend (*Annual Report to Congress*, 2000). These programs are "means tested," that is, participation is limited to seniors whose annual income is below a certain level. Two other federal programs for older volunteers—the Retired and Senior Volunteer Program (RSVP) and the Senior Corps of Retired Executives (SCORE)—are much larger and are not means tested. But they have no specific requirements for level of participation (that is, participants can contribute as much or as little time as they wish) and offer no stipends.

Civic Ventures' Experience Corps® represents an attempt to create a new model for seniors' civic engagement. Launched in 1996, it offers adults older than age 55 the opportunity to commit a significant amount of time (15 hours a week) in providing an important community service in return for a small stipend to cover out-of-pocket expenses. (There are also opportunities for individuals to contribute lesser amounts of time.) The initial focus of Experience Corps has been on recruiting members to serve as mentors and tutors to at-risk school children. In the future, Experience Corps members may address other social needs. The program now involves more than 1,500 participants in 13 communities and is just now beginning to move toward scaling up in several of the cities in which it operates. (The organization has recently published *Appealing to Experience* (2005), a practical guide to creating effective recruitment messages aimed at older adults. Another useful guide to engaging older adults is *50+ Volunteering: Working for Stronger Communities*, 2004, from the Points of Light Foundation.)

*Changing the aging paradigm.* The dominant paradigm of aging has traditionally been based on the premise of decline and an increasing need for support. As a result, the “aging establishment” in this country has focused on delivering needed services, such as meals, transportation, medical care, and housing, to support the frail and/or poor elderly. A new paradigm has been emerging that looks at older people not just as recipients of service but as resources who have accumulated a great deal of experience that can be enormously useful to society. This perspective is not intended to replace the old one but to supplement it.

A parallel shift is taking place around the concept of retirement. Traditionally seen as a time for withdrawal from active participation in society and a time to enjoy leisure activities, retirement is increasingly being seen as a transition to a new phase of life that offers its own challenges and opportunities, including opportunities for continued contribution to society. As the oldest of the baby boomers reaches 60, there will be millions of adults who are entering the next stage of their lives—but with a new perspective on what retirement means.

To help accelerate these shifts, all three of the major national professional organizations in aging—the American Society on Aging (ASA), the Gerontological Society of America (GSA), and the National Council for the Aging (NCOA)—have launched initiatives designed to promote greater awareness of and support for civic engagement by older adults among their members and in the broader society. (All three projects are being supported by grants from the Atlantic Philanthropies, which has identified civic engagement among older adults as one of its priorities.)

Just this year, the ASA established a new track on civic engagement as part of its annual conference. It also will be communicating the results of research in the field to its members, to encourage them to put these findings into practice, and will highlight the issue to the members of its Journalists’ Exchange on Aging.

GSA has launched a 5-year initiative called *Civic Engagement in an Older America* that will promote the study of civic engagement by experts in the field of aging. In early 2005, it also sponsored public forums in four cities to provide input on the significance of civic engagement to the 2005 White House Conference on Aging.

And NCOA has launched a project called *RespectAbility* that includes a survey of nonprofit organizations to determine their readiness to provide meaningful volunteer opportunities for older volunteers, a film about the implications of an aging population, and a series of meetings around the country to increase understanding about how to tap older adults as a resource. Another national effort is being undertaken by the Harvard School of Public Health, which is developing a national media campaign (funded by the MetLife Foundation) intended to change public attitudes toward aging and motivate boomers and retirees to engage in community service.<sup>4</sup>

*Building pathways to engagement.* Although these national efforts can be useful, engagement happens locally. Therefore, a critical challenge is to build acces-

sible pathways to engagement for older adults on the local level. Civic Ventures has developed a concept called *The Next Chapter™ Initiative*, whose goal is to create a new kind of local resource to assist adults making the transition from midlife to a new life stage characterized by opportunities for connection and direction. The initiative is built on the premise that access to meaningful choices for work, service, lifelong learning, and social connections plays an important role in the health and ongoing development of older adults. It also emphasizes the importance of linkages to the life of the community and its needs (*Life Options Blueprint*, 2003).

Efforts to develop and launch Next Chapter programs are currently underway in places such as New York; Cleveland; Chicago; Phoenix; San Diego; Portland, Oregon; and Ocala and Winter Park, Florida.<sup>5</sup> Although the focus and scope of these projects vary from one community to another, they typically involve new types of partnerships among organizations and agencies that have not previously worked together. Many of them are being supported by grants from community foundations interested in expanding opportunities for older adults and strengthening the social fabric of their communities.

Among the institutions that are prominently involved in Next Chapter initiatives are public libraries and community colleges. For example, public libraries in Arizona and Connecticut are serving as hosts for new programs. These programs are part of a broader effort to create "21st Century libraries" that go beyond the traditional roles of libraries as repositories of information to serve as key connectors between community needs and local residents who have an interest in addressing those needs. In 2004, Libraries for the Future, a national organization that is a program division of the American for Libraries Council, launched a 4-year initiative called *Lifelong Access Libraries—Centers for Lifelong Learning and Civic Engagement*. The initiative is promoting a new library service model for working with older adults that emphasizes learning, social connections, life planning, and community engagement.

Bernie Ronan (2004), director of the Center for Civic Participation at Maricopa Community Colleges, noted that "community colleges have a rich history of [promoting] civic engagement, having undertaken community service and service learning projects for the past two decades." Community colleges are actively involved with Next Chapter projects in Cleveland; Phoenix; San Diego; Westchester County, New York; Ocala, Florida; and Portland, Oregon (Goggin & Ronan, 2004).

In Arizona, Mesa Community College and Scottsdale Community College are developing Next Chapter programs with support from the Virginia G. Piper Charitable Trust. The Mesa program includes the development of life planning services, gateways to opportunities for civic engagement and volunteerism, lifelong learning, and linkages to current and emerging services within the Mesa community. The goal of Scottsdale Community College's new LifeVentures pro-

gram is to provide opportunities for participants to discover a variety of resources to volunteer, pursue civic engagement, re-career and find employment, and to engage in lifelong learning, embark on healthy lifestyles, and enjoy social connections in a community for all ages. These programs represent a new way for colleges to reach out to and serve the needs of the growing number of older adults who are not attracted to traditional “senior programs.”

## Conclusion

All of these initiatives should be helpful in raising awareness of the potential value of increasing civic engagement by older adults. They should also be helpful in changing norms and expectations about life after retirement. They can help change the image of retirement from a time for extended leisure to a period for continued growth and contribution. They can help change the way organizations think (or don’t think) about the value of older adults as potential resources in supporting their missions. And they should be helpful in expanding meaningful opportunities for service in later life and in creating pathways to those opportunities.

But the heart of the movement toward greater engagement of older adults will be the actions of the millions of Americans who are reaching the end of midlife and are making decisions about how they want to spend their time in the next phase of their lives. Among other things, they will decide if they want to devote at least some of their time to helping others and to working to improve their communities. What kind of society we all will live in will depend to no small degree on what they decide.

## Notes

1. Google search conducted March 20, 2005. The number of references to *civic engagement* is considerably less than the number of Google citations for the related term *social capital*, which yields some 727,000 references—or about twice as many.

2. Each state has a commission that coordinates volunteer service activities in that state, though they may have different names in different states. A number of definitions come from a survey by Diller (2001) of these state commissions.

3. In a sense, this definition is almost tautological: *civic* meaning related to one’s role as a citizen and *engagement* being closely synonymous with *interaction*.

4. For details about the Harvard project, see [www.hspph.harvard.edu/chc/reinventingaging/index.html](http://www.hspph.harvard.edu/chc/reinventingaging/index.html).

5. A directory of Next Chapter projects is online at [www.civicventures.org/117.html](http://www.civicventures.org/117.html).

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